



# Parent Trigger: No Silver Bullet

A POLICY BRIEF

Center for Education Organizing



Annenberg  
Institute for  
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

# Parent Trigger: No Silver Bullet

In statehouses across the country, Parent Trigger legislation is being proposed as a remedy to the nation's education crisis. These laws authorize parents – through a petition drive at their child's school – to force their school district to convert that public school into a charter, replace its staff and leadership, or even close it down.

Supporters of Parent Trigger laws argue that they empower parents, giving them the ability to force

dramatic changes to improve low-performing schools. Critics argue that the laws don't give real, sustained power to parents; that the interventions authorized through Parent Trigger have no track record of actually improving schools; and that the laws are being used to privatize public schools through chartering.

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This brief reviews the history and current status of Parent Trigger legislation, presents a critique of the legislation, and suggests alternative ways to meet the stated goals of a Parent Trigger.

## What is a Parent Trigger Law?

The first Parent Trigger law was passed in California in 2010. The law authorizes parents to circulate a petition at a low-performing school, calling for one of four specific interventions – designed after the federal school turnaround models. If 51 percent of the parents at the school sign the petition, the district is directed to impose the requested model. The four interventions are:

- **Restart:** Convert the school into a charter school.
- **Turnaround:** Remove and replace at least half of the staff of the school.

- **Transformation:** Remove the current principal and implement other specified reforms.
- **Closure:** Close the school.

As of October 2012, five additional state legislatures have passed versions of the Parent Trigger, and several other states are considering proposals. To date, there has been only one successful effort to utilize the Parent Trigger process to intervene in a school.

The Parent Trigger initiative is led by an organization called Parent Revolution, which was founded in California in 2009 for the sole purpose of promoting and lobbying for that state's Parent Trigger law. Parent Revolution was founded by Ben Austin, a former policy consultant for Green Dot Charter Schools and a long-time political insider. Austin served as a deputy mayor in Los Angeles, worked on numerous Democratic presidential campaigns, worked in the Clinton White House, and was briefly a member of the California State Board of Education. Parent Revolution was launched with a million-dollar budget supported by the Gates, Broad, and Walton Foundations, all major philanthropic supporters of the charter school movement.

After the passage of Parent Trigger legislation in California, Parent Revolution took their campaign on the road. In December of 2010, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a coalition of legislators, businesses, and foundations that promotes conservative, corporate-supported policy proposals, voted to embrace the Parent Trigger. Since then, its members have introduced or co-sponsored Parent Trigger bills in seventeen states according to an analysis by the Center for Media

and Democracy.<sup>1</sup> The five states that have passed Parent Trigger laws, each with some variations, include Texas, Ohio (a pilot program for Columbus only), Indiana, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Key components of and links to these laws are included at the end of this brief.

## Implementation Attempts

To date, California has been the only state in which parents have attempted to utilize the Trigger provision. In both cases, Parent Revolution spearheaded the efforts. Both proved to be bitter, divisive, and protracted campaigns.

The first effort was at McKinley Elementary School in Compton, California. Parent Revolution drafted the petition, calling for the school to be taken over by Celerity Education Group, a California-based charter operator. Petitions were circulated by paid Parent Revolution staffers not affiliated with McKinley. The petition drive almost immediately caused a storm of protest from parents who argued that they had not been fully informed – or were actually misled – about the purpose of the petition drive. A number of parents eventually rescinded their signatures, claiming harassment and deception by Parent Revolution. Compton School District officials challenged the petitions as well, and a court ruled that the petitions were not valid for multiple reasons. The effort was eventually nullified, and the California General Assembly went back to the drawing board to develop new regulations to guide future efforts. The ordeal left parents in Compton divided and embittered. Parent Revolution’s executive director admitted that there wasn’t enough buy-in from parents to make the bid successful.<sup>2</sup>

Parent Revolution’s second attempt at implementing Parent Trigger took place at Desert Trails Elementary School in Adelanto, California. This time, Parent Revolution organized a group of parents to

spearhead the effort and began circulating two proposals. The primary petition called for parents to jointly run the school with the district and demanded specific interventions. A second “backup” petition demanded that Desert Trails be converted to a charter. This time, Parent Revolution included language allowing the parents themselves to choose the charter operator. After talks broke down on the primary petition, parents submitted the petition for charter conversion. As in Compton, the effort turned bitter. Nearly 100 parents rescinded their signatures, and the school board ruled that more than 200 others were invalid, dropping the number of valid signatures to just 37 percent of Desert Trails’ enrollment, short of the 51 percent required. In July of 2012, a superior court judge upheld the parent petition and authorized the next step in the process, a vote on which charter management organization would be hired to run the school. As allowed by state law, only those parents who had signed the petition were permitted to vote. In late October, those parents selected a charter school operator affiliated with a local university to take over Desert Trails.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.prwatch.org/node/11763](http://www.prwatch.org/node/11763)

<sup>2</sup> “Parent Trigger Law to Reform Schools Faces Challenges,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2011. [www.nytimes.com/2011/09/24/education/24trigger.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/24/education/24trigger.html)

## Why a Trigger is Not Enough

In addition to the practical challenges made clear by implementation attempts thus far, policy-makers aiming to engage parents in public education or improve low-performing schools should consider the limitations of using Parent Trigger to achieve those important goals.

Research does not support the elements of Parent Trigger laws either to effectively empower parents, or to improve student outcomes. One examination of Parent Trigger laws concluded that three key

elements of a smart approach to school turnaround are missing from them: first, that it “genuinely arise from deliberation and organization within the affected community, not through external advocacy groups using these communities to

advance their own agendas;” second, that it must impose interventions that are evidence based and likely to improve student outcomes; and third, that it focus more on opportunities to learn, rather than governance changes.<sup>3</sup>

Parent Trigger legislation gives parents the “power” to force the intervention but is silent on a continuing role for parents.

While there is undeniable appeal in the idea that parents can “take over” their child’s school and force dramatic change simply by circulating and signing a petition, the real benefit from parent engagement comes when parents have a long-term relationship to the school and when they can join with teachers, administrators, and students to design and implement an improvement strategy. Parent Trigger legislation gives parents the “power” to force the intervention but is silent on a continuing role for parents. Furthermore, there is no evidence that chartering or closing a school, or replacing a school’s entire staff – the interventions authorized by Parent Trigger – create academic improvement in and of themselves. Historically, the four interventions most commonly authorized through Parent Trigger laws have not proven effective in improving student outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

Why the push for Parent Trigger laws then? Critics of the laws believe that supporters of privatization are using the Parent Trigger laws as a mechanism to convert more traditional public schools into privately operated charters. Indeed, both Parent Revolution and the foundations that have bankrolled the effort to date strongly support charter schools. Both the Compton and Desert Trails efforts to utilize the law have involved petitions to convert the schools to charters. And in two of the states that have passed Parent Trigger legislation, converting to a charter is the *only* option allowed.

In addition to the lack of evidence that charter schools provide stronger academic outcomes than traditional public schools,<sup>5</sup> many parents, teachers, administrators, and public education advocates believe that privatization is a significant threat to our tradition of democratically controlled public education. Public schools are often steeped in tradition and serve as important social and cultural anchor institutions in their communities. They serve as symbols of the promise of democracy and possibility in the United States. When just half of

<sup>3</sup> Lubienski, C., Scott, J., Rogers, J., Welner, K. (2012). *Missing the Target? The Parent Trigger as a Strategy for Parental Engagement and School Reform*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Available at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/pm-trigger-2012.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Trujillo, T. & Rénee, M. (2012). *Democratic School Turnarounds: Pursuing Equity and Learning from Evidence*. Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Available at: [http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/pb-turnaroundequity\\_0.pdf](http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/pb-turnaroundequity_0.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> The largest of these studies is *Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in Sixteen States*, Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). Available at: [http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE\\_CHOICE\\_CREDO.pdf](http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).



the parents who currently have students in a public school are allowed to turn it over to private operators, it undermines the local control that communities should be able to exercise over their public institutions. Instead, privatization exposes public schools to potential manipulation by outside, private interests with even fewer mechanisms for democratic accountability.

Equity-oriented change and sustainable improvement in our nation’s most struggling schools are goals we can achieve when we embrace and honor the democratic tradition of an empowered and engaged citizenry. The notion and spirit behind the Parent Trigger idea may be noble, but as a mechanism for change it is fatally flawed. In the case of schools, it is imperative that families and community members forge deep ties and longstanding partnerships with their public schools. These are not conditions that come about by merely triggering a change process in which there is no role for families and communities except for signing a petition. In fact, successful change processes are about a lot more than their triggers; by definition they must entail thoughtful and comprehensive thinking from the start and throughout.

The outlined alternative approaches that follow make clear that Parent Trigger laws are not what we need and that instead, we must focus on reform efforts that consider the roles of multiple stakeholders fully, thoroughly, and over time. These alternatives move us away from the notion that equitable and sustainable change can result from anyone’s silver bullet fired by quick hands on a trigger.

## An Alternative Approach

A school improvement strategy should focus first on what’s happening in the classroom and design systems at both the school and district levels that support students, teachers, and families. Research on the “five essential supports” needed for successful school reform does not recommend changes in governance, but rather strategies that strengthen school leadership, improve the quality of instruction, support teachers, focus on student-centered learning, and engage families *and* community.<sup>6</sup>

There are models for successful school improvement strategies across the country. Many districts have demonstrated effective models that appear to create significant and lasting turnaround.<sup>7</sup>

In Connecticut, the legislature, confronted with a proposed Parent Trigger bill in 2010, instead crafted a bill that requires low-performing schools to establish “school governance councils” made up of parents, teachers, administrators, and community members who are tasked with conducting a thorough analysis of the supports and challenges in the school and developing a school improvement plan to be implemented with state support over three to five years. For the text of the Connecticut law, see: [www.cga.ct.gov/2012/ACT/PA/2012PA-00116-R00SB-00458-PA.htm](http://www.cga.ct.gov/2012/ACT/PA/2012PA-00116-R00SB-00458-PA.htm).

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<sup>6</sup> Bryk, A., Sebring, P.B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., and Easton, J.Q. (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>7</sup> See descriptions of several models in *A Way Forward: From Sanctions to Supports*, the report of the New York City Working Group on School Transformation (April 2012), produced with support from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. <http://annenberginstitute.org/pdf/SchoolTransformationReport.pdf>

In October 2012, the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) released a report on the history and impact of school improvement interventions of the kind called for in most Parent Trigger legislation. As an alternative, NEPC's report included legislative language proposing an in-school assessment of challenges and needs, followed by a school-led development of an improvement plan. Access the report here: <http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/lb-turnaroundequity.pdf>.

A coalition of community organizations developed a proposal in 2010 called "Sustainable School Transformation." Communities for Excellent Public Schools (CEPS) pro-

posed this model as an alternative or additional option for the federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) program. The proposal recommended an in-depth assessment and planning process by a team of teachers, parents, administrators, and students, followed by the develop-

ment of a school improvement plan that focused on improving instructional quality and content and providing wrap-around supports for students. Download the CEPS proposal here: [www.otlcampaign.org/resources/proposal-sustainable-school-transformation](http://www.otlcampaign.org/resources/proposal-sustainable-school-transformation).

These reform ideas have much in common. Unlike Parent Trigger, they focus on the substance of teaching and learning, support for disadvantaged students through additional services and wrap-around supports, and ongoing collaboration between teachers, parents, administrators, and the school community. The following elements are

present in many of these proposals and offer a strong, comprehensive alternative to Parent Trigger:

### **Collaboration and partnership at all stages to ensure local ownership and relevance**

- Parents, students, teachers, and community members are engaged from the beginning of reform efforts and on an ongoing basis.
- School-based teams made up of parents, students, community members, and school staff help design and implement a reform plan that meets the specific needs of the school and community.
- The school improvement plan is based on a thorough assessment of the school's challenges and strengths and specifically designed to address the needs of the students and instructional team.
- The district and state education agencies are tasked with supporting the local team and providing the resources necessary to ensure success.

### **Attention to strong instructional practices and supports for teachers and teaching, curriculum that is rigorous and relevant to students, and safe and secure schools**

- School improvement plans employ the best and most relevant in instructional strategies, supports for high-quality teaching, and the use of data to inform an understanding of student needs.
- Supports for teachers include time for collaboration and support in building meaningful relationships with students and their families.
- Schools are safe and secure, without the use of zero-tolerance policies and oppressive law enforcement presence.

### **Wrap-around services to support student and family needs**

- An assessment process is developed to identify and address students' non-academic needs.

Unlike Parent Trigger, alternative approaches focus on teaching and learning, support for disadvantaged students, and collaboration between teachers, parents, administrators, and the school community.

- There is access to college and career counselors, mentors, and tutors.
- Extended school days and years are utilized to provide students with additional academic supports and provide teachers with (and fully compensate them for) more time for planning and collaboration.

These comprehensive proposals offer not only more authentic and ongoing parent and community roles in improving schools than Parent Trigger laws, but they also contain strong, research-based instructional components and a focus on the social, health, and academic supports needed by all students.

## More Information About Existing Parent Trigger Laws

The following are brief descriptions of and links to existing Parent Trigger laws:

**California:** (2010) Parents can petition to force an intervention in the identified school. The intervention must be designated in the petition and must be one of the four school improvement options identified in the federal School Improvement Grant program. [www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/09-10/bill/sen/sb\\_0001-0050/sbx5\\_4\\_bill\\_20100107\\_chaptered.pdf](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/09-10/bill/sen/sb_0001-0050/sbx5_4_bill_20100107_chaptered.pdf)

**Indiana:** (2011) Under Indiana's law, parents of students in schools identified by the state as low performing for two or more years in a row can petition to have the school converted into a charter school. The school board then votes on whether to accept the petition. [www.in.gov/legislative/bills/2011/HE/HE1002.1.html](http://www.in.gov/legislative/bills/2011/HE/HE1002.1.html)

**Louisiana:** (2012) Louisiana's Trigger law states that schools identified as "D" or "F" for three consecutive years under the state's grading system are subject to parent petitions requesting that the school be taken out of local school board control and placed under the authority of the state-run

Recovery School District (RSD). This move requires approval of the state board of education. [www.legis.state.la.us/billdata/streamdocument.asp?did=793655](http://www.legis.state.la.us/billdata/streamdocument.asp?did=793655)

**Mississippi:** (2010) This bill allows parents at schools with three or more consecutive years classified as failing by the state to petition to convert the school into a charter. The petition can call for conversion into a digital charter school and/or the hiring of a for-profit or nonprofit education management company. <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/2010/pdf/SB/2200-2299/SB2293SG.pdf>

**Ohio:** (2011) The reform options that can be requested by petitions with the majority of parents signing are: conversion to a charter school; replacing at least 70 percent of the school's academic personnel; contracting operations to another school district, the state education department, or an education management organization; or restructuring the school's staffing or governance. The law is limited in scope to Columbus and only potentially affects nine schools. [www.legislature.state.oh.us/BillText129/129\\_HB\\_153\\_EN\\_N.html](http://www.legislature.state.oh.us/BillText129/129_HB_153_EN_N.html)

**Texas:** (2011) The state requires schools that fail to meet performance targets to be "reconstituted" with a new reform plan including replacement of the principals and teachers. If the schools continue to fail to meet performance targets, after three more years parents can petition to implement one of three options at the school: 1) repurposing the campus, which requires a new academic program, replacing faculty, and allowing students to transfer; 2) selecting an education management organization or another district to take over operations of the school; or 3) closing the school. [www.legis.state.tx.us/tlodocs/82R/billtext/html/SB00738I.htm](http://www.legis.state.tx.us/tlodocs/82R/billtext/html/SB00738I.htm)

## Resources

The National Conference of State Legislatures tracks Parent Trigger laws. A review of various state laws and their components can be found here: [www.ncsl.org/issues-research/educ/state-parent-trigger-laws.aspx](http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/educ/state-parent-trigger-laws.aspx).

*Missing the Target: The Parent Trigger as a Strategy for Parent Engagement and School Reform* by Christopher Lubienski, Janelle T. Scott, John Rogers, Kevin G. Welner. National Education Policy Center (September 5, 2012): <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/missing-the-target>.

The Heartland Institute, a conservative, free-market oriented policy research think tank, supports Parent Trigger legislation and maintains a page of legislative updates and links to Parent Trigger legislation across the country: <http://theparenttrigger.com/in-your-state/>.



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